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ABSTRACT

A study examined the construct of "perceived caring" in the instructional context which is believed to be related to the classical construct of "good will" in Aristotelian rhetorical theory as well as more contemporary social scientific views of "intent toward receiver" in conceptualizations of source credibility. The hypothesis used was that students who perceive their teachers as more caring will (1) evaluate those teachers more positively; (2) evaluate the course content more positively; and (3) report that they have learned more in the course. Subjects were 235 students enrolled in Communication classes at an eastern university. Target teachers were those the participants had in the class they took immediately prior to the class in which data were collected. Data were collected during regularly collected classroom periods approximately 12 weeks into the semester. A 22-item bipolar scale was employed for measurement, including 6-item measures of competence and trustworthiness. Results indicated that support for all three facets of the hypothesis was strong. Findings revealed that student perceptions of caring on the part of their teachers were found to be substantially associated with the students' evaluation of their teachers, their affective learning, and their perceptions of their cognitive learning. Further research to help identify the specific teacher behaviors which communicate caring to students is suggested. (Contains 3 tables of data and 23 references.) (Author/CR)

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THE RELATIONSHIP OF PERCEIVED TEACHER CARING WITH STUDENT LEARNING AND TEACHER EVALUATION

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Abstract

The research reported relates to the construct of "perceived caring" in the instructional context which is believed to be related to the classical construct of "good will" in Aristotelian rhetorical theory as well as more contemporary social scientific views of "intent toward receiver" in conceptualizations of source credibility. Student perceptions of caring on the part of their teachers were found to be substantially associated with the students' evaluation of their teachers, their affective learning, and their perceptions of their cognitive learning. Research is called for which helps to identify the specific teacher behaviors which communicate caring to students.

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THE RELATIONSHIP OF PERCEIVED TEACHER CARING

WITH STUDENT LEARNING AND TEACHER EVALUATION

A teacher's classroom behavior is constantly under scrutiny by students. As a result students learn a great deal from a teacher's nonverbal behavior as well as their verbal behavior (Galloway, 1976). A teacher's facial expression, gaze, posture, and other body movements provide the student with valuable information about her or his emotional state, attitude toward the students, and familiarity or ease with the lecture format. Ramsey (1979) suggests that "in addition to presenting a lecture... by the way she [sic] moves, stands, gestures, uses eye contact and vocal inflection, a teacher also tells her class about herself, how she feels toward the subject matter and the very act of lecturing, and how she feels about them" (p. 110). In sum, students determine how a teacher feels about them by observing the teacher's communication behaviors.

One assumption often made about teacher-student relationships is that the behavior patterns of teachers affect the behavior patterns of students. Presumably, then, the more that students perceive their teacher cares about them, the more the students will care about the class, and the more likely they will be to pay attention in class and consequently learn more course material.

McCroskey (1992) advanced the concept of "perceived caring" as a central perception of teachers on the part of students. He suggests that it probably is best if a teacher ***really*** cares about the student, but notes that it is difficult for any teacher to care a great deal about every student--particularly when teaching very large classes. Thus, it is important for a teacher to learn how to communicate in such a manner that students will perceive that he or she cares about them, whether or not that is the case in reality. It is not the caring that counts; it is the perception of caring that is critical. If a teacher cares deeply, but does not communicate that attribute, he or she might as well not care at all.

McCroskey (1992) attributes the source of his belief in the importance of caring to the writings of Aristotle and suggests the nature of this perception was first presented under the rubric of ***"good will"*** in Aristotle's ***Rhetoric*** during his discussion of the concept of ***"ethos."*** More recently, Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953) discussed a very similar construct under the label of "intention toward the receiver." Contemporary scholarship, for the most part, has ignored or discounted this perception as a component of ethos (or more commonly ***"source credibility"***) due to problems confronted when trying to measure it (McCroskey, 1966; McCroskey & Young, 1981), and has focused primary attention on the other components of the construct, competence and trustworthiness. In the early factor analytic work on ethos, no clear "good will" dimension emerged. This may have been a function of not having a

sufficient number of items related to this construct in the item pool (McCroskey 1966). In later work the "character" dimension sometimes split to form two factors, one of which sometimes received the label "sociability" (McCroskey & Young, 1981). The other dimensions continued to be referred to as character. We believe it is possible that the two dimensions of trustworthiness and good will may have been lumped together as "character" as a methodological artifact early and survived as an interpretation error in later work. In any event, "perceived caring" is seen as highly associated with, if not isomorphic with, Aristotle's conceptualization of "good will."

Three factors have been advanced which are believed likely to lead students to perceive the teacher as caring about their welfare: empathy, understanding, and responsiveness (McCroskey, 1992). Empathy is the capacity to see a situation from the point of view of another person and feel how they feel about it. Research by Stiff, Dillard, Somera, Kim, and Sleight (1988) has strongly supported the theory prosocial behavior is best interpreted as stemming from altruistic motives. Hence, when students see teachers behaving in positive ways toward them, it is reasonable to interpret that as motivated by the teacher's concern for them. Some teachers in instructional situations are able to see things from the students' perspective, while others seem unable or unwilling to do so. When a teacher can not only understand a student's view but also respect it, the teacher may be granted more credibility, and the students are more likely to believe the teacher cares about them.

Understanding is the ability to comprehend another person's ideas, feelings, and needs. Perceived understanding has been found to have positive impact in a variety of communication contexts (Cahn, 1986; Cahn & Shulman, 1984; Cushman, & Cahn, 1985). Some teachers are quite good at determining when students are having a problem either personally, or with the course content, while others seem very insensitive to these things. Those teachers who seem to be able to understand may indeed have more experiences of their own that have helped them to understand. At any rate, when students observe a teacher exhibiting such understanding, they may be more likely to perceive the teacher as caring about them.

The third factor of perceived caring is responsiveness. "Responsiveness is exhibited when teachers react to student needs or problems quickly, when the teacher is attentive to the student, when the teacher listens to what the student says" (McCroskey, 1992, p. 111). Responsiveness has been found to be very important to the way teachers are perceived by their students (Robinson, 1995; Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). A responsive teacher recognizes and reacts to students, while the nonresponsive teacher's behavior is not adapted to the students. A highly unresponsive teacher would be one who is a prisoner to the lectern and reads his or her lecture to the students. Conversely, an interactive, responsive teacher modifies her or his behavior throughout a class depending on how

the students are reacting in that class. Students who perceive a teacher regularly responding to them may also see the teacher as caring more about them.

Hypotheses

Traditional (Aristotelian) rhetorical theory as well as contemporary social science research results point to a positive relationship between perceived ethos/source credibility and other positive attitudes toward a source (for a summary of that research see McCroskey, 1993, ch. 5). Similarly, research has indicated a substantial correlation between increased ethos/source credibility and learning (Andersen, 1973; Dempsey, 1975; Wheeless, 1974a, 1974b, 1975). Given that the construct of "perceived caring" is viewed as similar to, if not isomorphic with, the theoretical dimension of ethos or source credibility variously labeled "good will" or "intent toward receiver," we believed that the previous research permitted us to advance the foilowing hypotheses:

H1. Teachers who are perceived as more caring by their students will also be evaluated more positively by their students.

H2. Students who perceive their teachers as more caring will evaluate the course content more positively.

H3. Students who perceive their teachers as more caring will report they have learned more in the course.

PROCEDURES

Respondents in the study were 235 students enrolled in Communication classes at an Eastern university. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The target teachers were those the participants' had in the class they took immediately prior to this class in which the data were collected. This technique was introduced by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986). It allows a large variety of course selections and teachers for data analysis. This procedure also enables the sampling of teachers who may not normally be willing to participate in this type of educational research. In order to preserve anonymity of both the teachers and the participants, the students were asked not to identify either themselves or the teacher of the class to which they were responding. While no information concerning the classes the students reported on was collected in the present study, it was presumed the procedure would produce the kind of variety observed in previous work employing this course and procedure. In the previous work, this procedure has generated data representing classes of all sizes and representative of the wide variety of subject-matter offerings in the university. Since the class in which the data were collected was a service course which enrolls students from all areas of the university, it was reasonable to expect the sample would be representative of teachers and classes in the parent population. However, this procedure did not permit examination of possible

differences in perceived caring or its effects as a function of either class size or subject matter area.

Data were collected during regularly scheduled classroom periods. Data were collected approximately twelve weeks into the semester. This timing ensured that the respondents were well acquainted with the teacher's typical classroom behaviors.

Measurement

Perceived Caring. As noted above, the construct of "perceived caring" was believed to be similar to the construct variously labeled "good will" or "intent toward the receiver." That construct had declined in use as a function of the factor analytic studies which failed to isolate a dimension representing this construct. This measurement problem has apparently been recently overcome by Koehn and Crowell (1996). They have reported the development of a Likert-type measure of this construct based on the caring conceptualization advanced by McCroskey (1992) which clearly appears to tap into the "good will" construct. Since this measure was not yet available when the current study was designed, we choose to employ a 22-item bipolar scale. Six-item measures of competence and trustworthiness (McCroskey & Young, 1981) were included in this scale. The remaining ten items formed what we presumed would be a measure of perceived caring. This scale had not previously been used. The items were presented in the usual manner with the student's instructor as the concept and each item providing a seven-step continuum for response. This approach is consistent with previous work using bipolar scales to measure source credibility or attitude (McCroskey & Richmond, 1989). The scales used to measure perceived caring were:

> 1) Cares about me/Doesn't care about me; 2) Has my interests at heart/Doesn't have my interests at heart; 3) Self-centered/Not self-centered;4) Unconcerned with me/Concerned with me; 5) Insensitive/Sensitive; 6) Empathetic/Apathetic; 7) Not understanding/Understanding; 8) Unresponsive/Responsive; 9) Understands how I feel /Doesn't understand how I feel; 10) Doesn't understand how I think/ Understands how I think.

The scale has good face validity and it was found to have an alpha reliability of .95 in this study. Consistent with the listing of the items above, the polarity of half of the twenty-two scales on the instrument was reversed to reduce item-response bias.

An iterated principal factor analysis was computed to determine whether the scale was best interpreted as representing a single dimension or was multi-dimensional. Since competence and trustworthiness have been found to form separate dimensions in many previous studies, at least two factors were expected, three if caring was not simply a part of one of the other factors. Several items were

found to have their highest loadings on factors other than the principal factor, indicating that a multi-dimensional interpretation was appropriate. Three factors had eigenvalues above one, and since three factors were expected, an oblique rotation analysis of the data was conducted. This analysis generated the three expected dimensions, with all of the items which were presumed to measure perceived caring having their highest loadings on a single factor and none of the items presumed to measure character or competence having their highest loading on that factor. Table 1 reports the obtained loadings for the caring factor. While the "Empathic/Apathetic" item had its highest loading on the caring factor, it was much weaker than the other items and should be discarded in future use of this measure, as it was in this study. Discussions with students who were not in this study but were undergraduates at the same institution indicated many of them were unfamiliar with the words "empathy" and "empathic," which probably explains why this was a poor item.

The intercorrelations among the factors were competence/caring, .60; trustworthiness/caring, .63, and competence/trustworthiness, .60. These are all moderately high correlations and in the range that should be expected for dimensions of a larger construct (ethos or credibility). The alpha reliabilities for the scores for the competence, character, and caring dimensions were .86, .86, and .95 respectively.

The perceived caring scale developed by Koehn and Crowell (1996) became available just as the data were being collected for this study. Consequently, it also was administered in order to obtain an estimate of the validity of our new measure. The concurrent validity indicated by the correlation of the scores on the two perceived caring measures was .86. This suggests the two measures should be able to be used interchangeably in future research with a reasonable expectation that they are measuring the same construct.

Teacher Evaluation. To measure teacher evaluation, students were asked to complete two four-item (McCroskey, 1994) measures of attitudes toward the teacher (good/bad; valuable/worthless; fair/unfair; negative/positive). In the present investigation, alpha reliabilities of these scales were .96 for their attitude toward the instructor and .98 for their likelihood of taking another course with that instructor.

Affective Learning. To measure affective learning, students were asked to complete two, four-item (McCroskey, 1994) measures reflecting affect toward the course content (good/bad; worthless/valuable; fair/unfair; negative/positive) and toward enrolling in another course with similar content (likely/unlikely; impossible/possible; probable/improbable; would not/would). In the present investigation, alpha reliabilities of these scales were .91 for their affect toward the course content and .98 for their likelihood of enrolling in another class with similar content. It should be noted that these affective evaluations of course content and potential future enrollment represent only two aspects of the affective learning domain. Given their

wide use in previous research, and the successful outcomes of that research, we believed it was reasonable to consider these as representative elements of the affective learning construct.

Cognitive Learning. Student perceptions of cognitive learning were assessed by their responses on two scales (Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987). The measure asked students to indicate (on a scale of 0-9) how much they felt they learned in the class on which they were reporting and how much they believed they could have learned had they had an ideal instructor. Scores from item one were subtracted from item two to obtain a "learning loss" score.

Data Analyses

To analyze the data relating to the three hypotheses, simple correlations were computed between scores for perceived caring and those for teacher evaluation and both affective and cognitive learning. Alpha was set at .05 for all tests of significance. Simple statistics for the caring and outcome measures are reported in Table 2.

RESULTS

The first hypothesis predicted that teachers who are perceived as more caring by their students would also be evaluated more positively by their students. Correlations between teacher caring and teacher evaluation were computed. The results confirmed this hypothesis. The correlation of perceived caring with evaluation of the instructor was $r = .81$ ($p < .0001$) and that of perceived caring with likelihood of taking another course with that instructor was $r = .72$ ($p < .0001$). Both of these correlations may be referred to as high, hence the support for this hypothesis is strong.

H2 predicted that students who perceive their teachers as more caring will also evaluate the content of the course that instructor is teaching more positively. Correlations between perceived caring and both student affect toward the content and student willingness to take another class in the content were conducted. The results supported this hypothesis. The correlation between perceived caring and affect toward course content was $r = .64$ ($p < .0001$). The correlation between perceived caring and willingness to take another course in the content was $r = .53$ ($p < .0001$). The magnitude of these correlations provides strong support for the hypothesis.

The third hypothesis predicted that students who perceive their teachers as more caring will report they learned more in the course. Given the nature of our measure of student-perceived learning, this hypothesis predicted the students would

report ***less*** learning loss. The obtained correlation between perceived caring and reported learning loss was $r = -.65$ ($p < .0001$). This hypothesis also received strong support.

The underlying assumption in this research was that students' perceptions of the caring of their teachers would be at least partially independent of their other credibility perceptions (which was confirmed by the factor analysis noted above) and that those perceptions would predict unique variance in teacher evaluation, affective evaluation of the content of the course, and student perceptions of their cognitive learning. Consequently, multiple regressions, correlations, and partial correlations were computed to determine whether perceived caring could predict unique variance in the five dependent variables under study.

The relevant results of the regression and partial correlations are reported in Table 3. As indicated in that table, the three dimension scores jointly predicted a very large proportion of the variance in all of the dependent variables. Similarly, the simple correlation of perceived caring with each of the dependent variables indicated caring alone was highly predictive of the dependent variable scores. Most importantly, the partial correlations (removing the variance predicted by either competence or trustworthiness and that jointly predicted by those two dimensions) indicated that a substantial proportion of the variance in each of the dependent variables was uniquely predicted by perceived caring. Caution should be exercised in generalizing these results, however. Since the caring scores were based on 9-item scales while competence and trustworthiness scales included only 6-items, the caring measure had more precision that did the other two. This could account for some of the strength in perceived caring's prediction of the dependent variables in this study. Future research which wishes to make comparisons among the credibility dimensions' predictive power should take care to insure that measures of each dimension are relatively equal in precision.

DISCUSSION

This research was designed to test three hypotheses based on the theoretical relationship between "perceived caring," as representative of one of the three classical dimensions of ethos/source credibility, and relevant instructional outcomes--teacher evaluation, affective learning, and cognitive learning. Caution should be exercised to not over-interpret the results of this research. The data obtained for this research were drawn from the naturalistic environment of college classrooms. They do not permit causal interpretation. All of the variables studied in this research are substantially correlated, hence are likely to have been generated by causal relationships. The precise nature of such relationships needs to be explored by appropriate experimental research procedures which permit testing of causal prediction. Given this limitation, it is nevertheless important to note how the results

of this study are consistent with current theory relating to causal relationships among these variables. The results of this study clearly support the theory that perceived caring generates more positive teacher evaluations and influences levels of learning of both affective and cognitive learning in a positive way.

Aristotle posited three components of ethos: intelligence, character, and good will. The first two are normally labeled today as competence and trustworthiness, and both have been demonstrated previously as related to learning. Conspicuously missing from research done on source credibility is the last dimension, good will. The reason for this is that in the seminal measurement of credibility, good will was not found to be distinguishable from character. However, there is also argument in social psychology that something akin to good will does exist as a dimension of credibility. Hovland, Janis and Kelly (1953) alluded to this dimension as the "intention toward the receiver."

Aristotle and Hovland et al. (1953) agree that a source is judged by an audience in terms of her or his knowledge of the subject, veracity, and attitude toward the well-being of the audience. Based on this agreement, there was reason to believe that intention toward the receiver/good will should be independent from the other two dimensions of credibility, competence and character, or at least not totally subsumed by them. The reason that this theoretical dimension has been dropped is based on methodology of measurement. In the instructional arena, perceived caring was thought to represent that dimension.

Both the good will and intention toward the receiver conceptualizations are manifested in the "perceived caring" construct. Students will most certainly be more likely to attend class and listen more attentively to a teacher who is perceived to have their interests at heart. A teacher who remains indifferent or egocentric will not win over the hearts of her or his students. Teachers do not have to have all students agree with everything they say, but if the teacher engages in behaviors that communicate such a positive intent toward the student, it is more likely that the student will engage in more effort to learn what the teacher is attempting to teach.

This research provides evidence that perceived caring is associated with increased affective and perceived cognitive learning in the classroom. Further research should be conducted to determine what behaviors may increase perceived teacher caring in the classroom. Given the apparent importance of this student perception, isolation of its correlates with teacher behaviors may lead to substantial improvements in instruction through teaching these behaviors to pre-service and in-service teachers. Future research should direct particular attention toward the relationship between perceived caring and nonverbal immediacy. The strong relationships which both have now been found to have with affective learning suggest that the nonverbal immediacy behaviors of the teacher may be what is cuing

students' perceptions of teacher caring. If so, this may serve to better explain how immediacy functions in the instructional environment.

Another element which has received considerable attention in this area is teachers' use of power to influence student behaviors. It would seem likely that this is an area where specific teacher behaviors (use of antisocial behavior alteration techniques) may lead to students perceiving their teachers as uncaring.

There are also implications of this research that may be generalized to the study of communication in other non-instructional contexts. Since we were able to develop a reliable measure of perceived caring which appears to tap into the theoretical third dimension of the ethos/source credibility construct, it would be appropriated to revisit the question of the dimensionality of source credibility/ethos and its measurement. We believe that the discarding of the third dimension may have been a premature response based on inadequate methodology rather then refined conceptualization.

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TABLE 1
Loadings for Items on the Caring Factor

Item	Loading
1	.88
2	.85
3	.75
4.	.89
5.	.77
6.	.43
7.	.83
8.	.86
9.	.69
10.	.82

Table 2
Simple Statistics For Measures

Measure	Mean	SD	Reliability	Range
Caring	42.9	13.6	.95	13-63
Instructor Evaluation	21.4	7.3	.96	4-28
Enroll With Instructor	19.8	8.4	.98	4-28
Affect Toward Content	21.5	6.1	.88	4-28
Take Another Course	19.4	9.3	.98	4-28
Perceived Learning Loss	1.6	1.9	NA	0-9

Table 3

Predictable Variance Estimates*

Dependent Variable	Predictors: All Three Dimensions (Multiple r^2)	Predictors: Raw Score Caring (Simple r^2)	Predictors: Unique to Caring (Partial r^2)
Instructor Evaluation	.68	.65	.20
Enroll with Instructor	.54	.52	.17
Affect toward Content	.45	.41	.10
Take another Course	.29	.28	.09
Perceived Learning Loss	.45	.43	.11

*All variance estimates are based on correlations which are significant, $p < .001$.